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Understanding Intentions: A Response to James Brown

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By Olga Krasnyak

I'd like to respond to Dr. James Brown's [recently published paper](#) entitled 'Putting a spoke in the wheel: Russian efforts to weaken U.S.-led alliance structures in Northeast Asia' that he presented at KEI on 18 June 2020. Brown's main argument is that Russia intends 'to undermine the unity of Western alliances' but more specifically – 'to weaken the South Korean and Japanese alliances with the United States.' While using the Russian-language sources to support his argument, Brown brings a number of examples illustrating Russia's assertive behavior in Northeast Asia.

To be sure, there is no way to deny Russia's belligerent behavior in the region as shown by the author. Yet, what is more important is to look at the situation from Russia's perspective. In this case, understanding Russia's intentions that are based on historical and geographical peculiarities of the country, its relations with neighbors and with major powers is key.

As represented in the paper, Brown's arguments rather leaves an impression of the old-fashioned Russo-phobic rhetoric inherited from the Cold War period. Such rhetoric surely doesn't weigh the main argument. However, to some extent, the Cold War narrative still navigates world politics and inter-state relations, and it's here to stay for some time.

Assessing the article, my simple counter-argument is that Russia, as any other regional or global power, pursues its national interests and does not necessarily intend to deliberately harm the existing alliance structure in Northeast Asia. Moreover, if the U.S.-South Korea and U.S.-Japan alliances remain strong, there is nothing to fear to undermine them. If the U.S.-led alliance system in the region is showing elements of corrosion, pointing fingers and blaming Russia is a rather weak position considering domestic challenges within the alliance and the global shift towards multipolarity.

Diplomacy and derzhavnost'

As Brown rightly noted, diplomacy is a tool to implement a nation-state's foreign policy objectives. Therefore, understanding Russia's foreign policy is important to assess diplomatic means and ends. Historically, Russia's foreign policy has been the pursuit of influence over Eurasia, including the Far East, reflected in the national idea *derzhavnost'*. Seva Gunitsky and Andrei Tsygankov, Russian-born political scientists based in Canada and U.S. respectively [defined](#) the term as 'the state of possessing – and being recognized by others to possess – clear status as a great power.' In other words, putting the national idea of *derzhavnost'* at the core of Russian foreign policy explains that the country sees itself a great power and it seems there's no option for Russia to reconsider this view any time soon.

As for South Korea and Japan – despite their economic and technological capabilities – Russia more than likely does not consider them geopolitical competitors. Instead, pure pragmatism and rationality to maintain friendly and beneficial relations with both neighboring countries

remains Russia's foreign policy objective through diplomacy.

Air incursions and military exercises

Air incursions and joint military exercises are another key point to which Brown refers in characterizing Russia's ill intentions. However, intrusions into the airspace of other countries or military exercises performed close to foreign territory is not something that Russia does exclusively. Such intrusions and exercises are the legacy of the Cold War and is the reflection of the security dilemma. In this case, the intrusions and exercises serve defensive purposes although they have a psychological effect – to animate danger, threat, and fear.

An American political scientist Ben Buchanan, in his book [The Cybersecurity Dilemma](#) (2017), describes how during the Cold War the U.S. practiced intrusions into the Soviet air space as what it thought was a benign defensive activity. The Soviets, however, perceived American intrusions as aggressive and viewed them as a serious threat. Buchanan cited one American pilot who recalled that “sometimes we would fly missions over the Black Sea ... To tickle the Soviets a little and create more activity we would do a straight approach towards Sevastopol, turn and run out. Then we would listen to the racket” (p. 26).

Such intrusions led to tragedy in the different parts of the world. In 1983 the U.S. Navy conducted a massive military exercise in the North Pacific Ocean near the Kuril Islands, which was also often surveyed by American jets. It was an attempt to provoke a Soviet reaction with flights on or over the border, so that naval intelligence could study the response. Six American planes directly flew over Soviet military installations outraging the Soviets and prompting an angry Soviet diplomatic response. The incident built up Soviet anxiety that eventually led to tragedy when Korean Air Lines Flight 007 from New York to Seoul inadvertently entered Soviet airspace and was shot down destroying the airliner and killing all of the 269 passengers and crew aboard (p. 27).

In no way should one bring excuses or undermine the repercussions of such actions, but realistically the situation when a country uses air incursions or conducts military exercises along the borders of a country with adversarial intentions (i.e. U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises) to minimize the security dilemma, is a long-term practice continuously replicated by different countries at different times. Accusing only Russia of doing so, as Brown argues, sounds rather one-sided.

Plus, other recent events, such as the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Open Sky Treaty as well as from arms control arrangements negotiated with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, maximize the security dilemma and put countries to the rise of another arms race.

Information and public diplomacy

Brown pays special attention to Russia's public diplomacy and information campaign. Once again, public diplomacy is not a new tool to promote a nation-state narrative among foreign audiences. Practices of public diplomacy are also rooted in the Cold War Era. In 1953, the U.S. created the United States Information Agency (USIA) to ‘tell America's story to the world’ (for the detailed view and deeper analysis, see Nicholas J. Cull's [book](#) on the USIA). In Korea, earlier in 1950, when communist North Korea invaded non-communist South Korea, the U.S. prepared not only a military response, but also launched battlefield propaganda and an explanatory information campaign around the world. As for Japan, during the decades of the Cold War, the USIA put a lot of effort into producing a massive amount of publications as well as commissioning films, music and other cultural media aiming to promote American culture.

To be sure, America's public diplomacy slogan to influence hearts and minds of foreign publics – which may be outdated in its intended context – could relatively easily be adopted by any other power that has regional or global ambitions to promote its interests internationally. In this regard, Russia's information campaign in Japan – to which Brown references – should not look unique, exclusive or threatening. Quite the opposite – those are well-developed practices as set by the USIA.

To sum up, Brown's article makes an argument to prove that Russia has had bad intentions towards the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia. However, the evidence the author brings appears one-sided, with the facts taken out of their current and historical context. Nonetheless, the merit of the article is starting a discussion even though the conclusion of the article doesn't suggest any solutions to minimize the negative outcome that Russia's actions might cause as they are viewed by the author. As a suggestion, perhaps adding a diplomatic perspective if not to solve then to manage the ongoing problem by minimizing the security dilemma while trying to understand the other side's intentions would have been more beneficial for the discourse.

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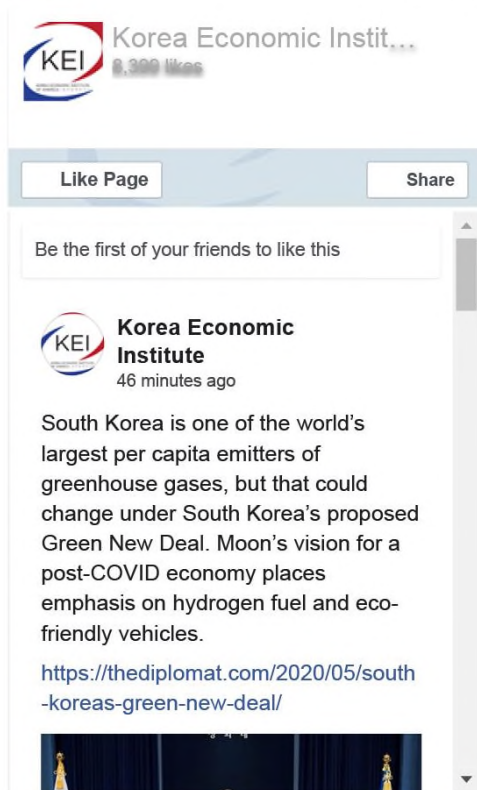
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